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Of beginning and end: production and deposition in later prehistory

Stijn Arnoldussen & Eugene A.G. Ball

Archaeology as a scholarly discipline has the scientific reconstruction of communities in the past, based on their material remains, as its main objective. From splinters of bone, researchers strive to reconstruct the composition of livestock or patterns of consumption and isolated postholes are assigned to house plans and sherds of pottery are used to construct tableware. Notwithstanding the fact that determining the age and original functions of objects will always form a central issue in archaeology, there is a risk of a one-sided approach towards material culture. Original form and function are but part of the story, as attention towards the ways in which objects were crafted (what materials were chosen, which techniques were applied, what skills were required?) is also very rewarding, as it holds ample information about how communities in the past engaged material culture themselves. Archaeological analysis of the production processes, patterns of use, reuse and repair are all informative on a level beyond that of functionalism and typochronology alone. Moreover, the study of the way people discarded objects in the past has also proven to yield rich insights into past human action. Not all archaeological remains represent meaninglessly discarded objects or buried waste. There is sound evidence that certain types of objects, and not only bronzes, were deliberately deposited in certain types of contexts (*e.g.* left behind as offerings). Clearly, the study of the entire life-history of objects, from their production to their deposition, has proven a fertile field of study commonly designated as the biographical approach.

Since the nineties of the former century the biographical approach (as inspired by Kopytoff (1986) and Gosden (1999; Gosden & Marshall 1999)) has gained momentum. This essentially anthropological framework tries to construct narratives (for objects, architecture et cetera) in which the different possible life-stages are discussed, and in which asking the proper questions yields information on the bandwidth of options available and chosen. As Igor Kopytoff (1986, 66-67) has put it:

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its "status" and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What

are the recognized “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?’

In Dutch archaeology, the biographic approach has mainly been applied with the field of (cultural) landscape studies (Hidding, Kolen & Spek 2001; Kolen 2005; Kolen & Witte 2006; Vervloet *et al.* 2010). This is striking, as there are fundamental issues when trying to apply Kopytoff’s approach to landscapes (*e.g.* what determines the ‘start’ or ‘end’ point of a cultural landscape?, *cf.* Vervloet *et al.* 2010, 134) and there is a significant risk of the concept of cultural biography being reduced to a buzzword, synonym for what are essentially histories of landscape use and habitation. That would be a long way of, from the valid and fertile approach that Kopytoff intended. More suitable applications of the biographical approach can be found in studies of the house(hold) (*e.g.* Gerritsen 2003) or studies of particular categories of material culture (*e.g.* Fontijn 2003; Van Gijn 2010; Raemaekers *et al.* 2011), that present better analogies, in terms of their life-histories, (*i.e.* birth/production, life/use-life, death/discard) to human life-cycles and thus suit the biographical approach better than landscape studies.

As archaeological fieldwork generally targets the locations where material culture was *used* (*i.e.* settlements), the two other anchor-points for a biographical narrative ‘the start’ (production) and ‘the end’ (discard and depositional patterns) are underrepresented. After an excavation of a settlement site, only rarely do the excavation reports raise questions as to where in the cultural landscape the production of the wooden, metal and ceramic artefacts did actually take place. Not only are such production sites rarely found and thus poorly known, the production processes of the artefacts recovered also merit more study. What choices were made in selecting base materials and in tools and techniques applied? What degree of variability in materials, style or forms of objects was desired or tolerated? How did locally manufactured objects compare to imported goods?

If one wants to learn more about the ‘deposition’ phase of objects, the study of funerary contexts is very informative – yet this type of study has thus far been undertaken mainly with Neolithic contexts (Wentink *et al.* 2011, yet compare Fontijn & Van der Vaart 2013). Additionally, the study of intentional depositions in (wet) parts of the landscape or settlement space has proven insightful (*e.g.* Fontijn 2003; Arnoldussen 2008, 442-444), but such locations are rarely excavated and seldomly studied from a biographical perspective. Research questions specifically targeting such matters are, moreover, generally absent in present-day commercial archaeological investigations. This means we lack answers to questions like ‘in what ways and in what form were objects left behind at the end of their lifecycle?’.

To draw more attention to the critical and informative phases at the beginning and end of object’s lifecycle, it was decided to select ‘Of beginning and end: production and deposition in later prehistory’ as the main theme for the 2014 Metaaltijdendag colloquium. In the call, explicit attention was directed towards the biographical approach applied to material culture and speakers were called upon to address the issues discussed above. Accordingly, the thematic presentations

comprised presentations on the production of bronze axes (Kuijpers, *this volume*), on iron production (N.Ø. Brusgaard; Brusgaard *in press*; Arnoldussen & Brusgaard 2014), on an enigmatic antler object (M. Rijkeliikhuizen, A. Verbaas & H. Siemons; *this volume*) and the production of glass bracelets (J. van der Laan; Roymans *et al.* 2014). Moreover, presentations addressed the full sequence from production to deposition for specific items such as prehistoric querns (M. Melkert; *this volume*) or discussed a biographical approach towards Iron Age houses (C. Koot). Finally, two presentations specifically targeted the final stages of object biographies. The recognizability of abandonment deposits in settlements was discussed by P.W. van den Broeke (*this volume*) and A. Nieuwhof (Nieuwhof 2015) addressed the depositional traditions in the coastal *terp* (raised dwelling mound) area.

Fortunately, a number of speakers agreed to publish their viewpoints as a paper in the present issue of *Metaaltijden*. Consequently, the present issue starts off with a number of contributions on objects and their specific lifecycles. Kuijpers ponders on the possibilities and problems of recognizing the skill involved in the production of Early Bronze Age axes. Van Alphen and Theunissen present a remarkable bronze bracelet that most likely was intentionally deposited into the river Meuse. Janssens brings forward an example of an object of the normally elusive Bronze Age bronze foundry.

In addition to the biographical study of metal items, other categories such as stone, bone and pottery have shown to yield important insights. Melkert provides a narrative of prehistoric querns that spans from their production to their discard or deposition. Rijkeliikhuizen, Verbaas and Siemons discuss an ornately decorated antler object the function of which – despite detailed study – remains beyond our grasp. Bloo, Kooi and Kleijne discuss the implications of a rare pottery find at Tilburg, and Van den Broeke – after critical consideration – shows that pottery is an important item in abandonment deposits on settlements. Similar to the setup of the *Metaaltijdendag* colloquium, the proceedings also offer a stage for publications not referring directly to that year's main theme. This year, the coastal part of the Western Netherlands is well represented amongst those publications. Kleijne discusses the Neolithic and Bronze Age funerary traditions of the Velsen area. A recent excavation from the same area inspired Van Heeringen to review the state of affairs regarding Bronze Age communities from the Western Netherlands. The Late Bronze Age in the coastal zone is represented as well: De Mulder offers a reinterpretation of a coastal cemetery discussed in the first *Metaaltijden* volume (Bulten & Opbroek 2014), and a Late Bronze Age ceramic assemblage from De Zilk is presented by Bloo and Briels. Lastly, Arnoldussen and Albers discuss the transformation of the Noordbarge urnfield (Drenthe) into settlement space and Wolthuis and Arnoldussen evaluate models of landscape preference and Iron Age settlement dynamics for the sandy regions of the Netherlands. All in all, this second volume of *Metaaltijden* covers the full range, from production and deposition of material culture, funerary traditions, settlements and remarkable patterns such as abandonment deposits from Dutch later prehistory.

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We sincerely hope you enjoy the present volume.

Stijn Arnoldussen & Eugene Ball
(Editors Metaaltijden 2)

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METAALTIJDEN 2

BIJDRAGEN IN DE STUDIE VAN DE METAALTIJDEN



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E.A.G. BALL & S. ARNOLDUSSEN

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